

# Finding their voice

It's often said that people join sporting clubs for the sense of community they offer. But of late, local choirs have begun to re-emerge as a sanctuary and place of bonding for people from all walks of life

MARGARET AMBROSE



**A**NNABEL Carr was in high school when a teacher told her she had no singing ability. "I had decided to join the choir," Carr remembers. "My best friend also auditioned and she got in, and this friend as well as the choir teacher said, 'Don't bother trying, you won't get in'."

A few years later, she went along to see the With One Voice choirs, a number of inclusive community singing groups that were performing at the Melbourne Town Hall.

"The choirs were very into audience participation so I was singing and joining in, and having a great time," she says.

Despite what her teacher had told her, she made it her New Year's resolution to join the With One Voice choir. Now, four years later, she rarely misses a Tuesday night rehearsal and performs with the choir at festivals, concerts and corporate events.

She is one of an increasing number of Melburnians who have never felt themselves to be particularly talented singers, but who have started gathering in halls around town to stand with a group of strangers and sing.

For those interested in taking their vocal cords out for a spin, Melbourne has different genres of choir from which to choose. There are religious choirs, community choirs and more up-market outfits of people with trained



voices and a burning ambition to be the best on the block.

With One Voice is a community choir franchise run by charity Creativity Australia. Sixteen choirs meet weekly around Australia, with 40 expected to be operating by 2020.

Social entrepreneur and soprano Tania de Jong founded the charity in 2008. She wanted to bring together people experiencing disadvantage and those more fortunate

through community singing. "Basically we aim to bridge the gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots' through our inclusive choirs," de Jong says. "We welcome people with depression, the unemployed, older people and those with disabilities — and more fortunate people — doctors, lawyers, teachers, CEOs. All of us come together to sing as one voice."

Since the choir's inception in 2008, de Jong has seen interest in the program skyrocket.

"There's been a massive growth of choirs worldwide," she says. "The number of choirs in the US has grown by 33 per cent over the last five years."

Denise Boyd is one of many inner-city professionals who have become regular choir-goers, joining other members of the Melbourne Singers of Gospel choir every Tuesday evening.

In her native Scotland, Boyd sang regularly with her school choir, but gave it up when she went to university and immigrated to Australia. "Then one year at the Apollo Bay Music Festival I saw the Melbourne Singers of Gospel," Boyd says. "They did a workshop and we went. It was fantastic fun and I remember thinking if I ever move to Melbourne, I am joining this choir."

"A few years later I did move to Melbourne and I emailed them and was put on a waiting list. Then about a year later a space opened up. I've been there ever since."

There are about 100 people in the Melbourne Singers of Gospel choir.

"Through hard work and practice we've developed a genuine Australian expression of modern and traditional gospel," Boyd says. "Everyone is different, but I like to use a combination of practice tracks that I download from the members' section of the website and sheet music."

"You can stick the practice tracks on your phone or device and then you can get on with whatever you're doing while you're listening

On song: The With One Voice choir (main and right) welcomes all-comers; and (clockwise from below) a scene from new film *The Song Keepers*; Annabel Carr enjoys singing as part of the With One Voice choir; Dr Darren Wicks, and the Melbourne Singers of Gospel.

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benefits of singing in groups. When you sing with other people, the right temporal lobe of your brain fires up, making you smarter, happier, healthier and more creative through the various endorphins that are released. Singing also improves your memory, language and concentration through increasing the neuroplasticity of your brain.

"There are many instances where singing is used as a therapy to help people who have had strokes recover their language, and help people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease reclaim a little more of their memories."

Wicks adds: "From a social perspective, singing helps children build relationships. "In fact, choral singing has been described as a form of group therapy that invites self-awareness and communal involvement leading to physical, spiritual and musical enlightenment."

Latest studies draw a connection between the act of singing and peak performance. "Then there's been a lot of research in the sports domain into what we call peak performance or flow experiences," Wick says. "Athletes that are doing great things are able to achieve a state of flow, where time almost stands still and they are no longer aware of the past or the future, they are just in the moment."

"There are various studies that have shown that group singing also seems to foster those experiences of flow. At the height of these experiences, they have shown that peoples' heartbeats and endocrine systems seem to come into synch."

According to Wicks, it's not only the physical similarities to sport. "There's an inherent desire in humans to connect with other humans. I see some of the benefits we get from being in a community choir, other people get from sports or football clubs.

"People involved in team sports go away

on weekend retreats; they socialise; there's camaraderie. Choirs foster the same meaningful connection."

Yet, unlike sports, choirs require little physical ability, making it an attractive choice for people with disability, the aged, or the just-not sporting minded.

"Choir is really the first environment I have come into where no one has asked about my disability," says Carr, who has cerebral palsy. "It's a very accepting culture."

Carr currently runs the Wish List Program, which is particular to the With One Voice choirs. At the end of every choir session, people may stand up and make a wish, and those in the choir endeavour to make that dream come true.

"Members are able to ask one another what they need in life, whether it's help to improve their resume and get a job, learn English, find a fridge, or find a friend to walk to the station with," de Jong says.

Carr, who had received help with her CV and found employment through the Wish List Program, recently returned the favour.

"There was a wish from an elderly lady who had to move out of her home. She'd lived in the house for about 50 years and she was really struggling with packing things up, deciding what to throw away and keep. A group of us from the choir offered to help her and we went there week after week helping her pack up, sort through her stuff, putting things on Gumtree," Carr says. "We call it Wish List but I often think of it as a space where people can share things with the choir."

With One Voice conductor Anthony Barnhill says: "People can put forward wishes but it also gives people a chance to share details about

themselves and their lives. They might say things like, 'I'm an artist and I have an art show on Saturday, could people come?'

While the number of people joining choirs is on the increase, Wicks does not see it as a new trend but rather a return to old ways.

"Australia has always been a singing nation," he says. "In colonial Australia, music education and singing were synonymous.

"They didn't have a lot of resources, and in England the tradition of choir singing was very strong.

"The English government actually sent out singing masters whose job it was to make sure that singing was being taught."

Of course, song and dance have long been instruments of Aboriginal Dreamtime, and after white settlement, many Aboriginal communities enthusiastically adopted the European traditions of choir.

"In the '50s, '60s and '70s, choirs were everywhere in the central desert," says Naina Sen, director of *The Song Keepers*, a new film that opened this week in selected cinemas. It explores choral singing in remote communities in Central Australia, following the story of four generations of women who make up the Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir.

## THERE'S BEEN A MASSIVE GROWTH OF CHOIRS WORLDWIDE

The group performs hymns that were brought by Lutheran missionaries and have been translated into local indigenous language.

Under the leadership of musical director Morris Stuart, the choir embarks on an historical tour of Germany, singing the baroque Lutheran hymns in their own languages.

Sen says that to the women, choir is sacred. "It's a predominantly women's space, where they are brought together by their love of singing and the happiness it brings," she says.

"They take care of each other, protect each other and have fun together. They are proud to belong to this group and uphold this tradition." Wicks also says it's possible a new trend in Canada could be soon hitting our shores.

"Now there's a new idea of the pub choir," he says.

"There are a couple of groups trying out the idea of bringing people into the pub to sing. The idea started in Canada with a group called Choir! Choir! Choir!, who have thousands of people turn out to their pub singalongs."

The pub might just be the perfect place for anyone who was ever told they cannot sing to muster the courage to find their voice.

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to it. A lot of it is repetition and just getting the patterns down. Then, when you get all the technical stuff down, you can just get on with enjoying the singing. I love it.

"Singing is a uniquely human behaviour and a defining feature of our humanity."

**M**ELBOURNE Singers of Gospel musical director Dr Darren Wicks agrees. "There is no human culture, no matter how remote or isolated, that does not sing.

"Undoubtedly, there's been a rise of interest in choirs and community singing in recent times. Some say that as the world becomes increasingly large and society becomes more disconnected, that people are naturally seeking forms of more meaningful connection.

"Others say that popular television talent shows and the YouTube phenomenon has contributed to a rise in the profile of singing.

"There are currently 178 choirs across metropolitan Melbourne. Most of those are the adult community choirs but on top of that you have school choirs, children community choirs, and then church choirs in their various forms."

Wicks says that all the research into the benefits of choral singing can be summed up in three words: "Singing is good".

De Jong agrees: "There is growing worldwide evidence of the neuroscientific

